

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Frederick Douglas Patterson and Tuskegee University's School of Veterinary Medicine

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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African-American veterinarians have played a special role in animal care and public health since the early days of the profession. Some of the northern veterinary colleges—notably Kansas State and the Ohio State Universities, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania—had educated African-American students before 1940. However, the total number of graduates during this period was small (about 70).

The most notable of those who received their DVM degrees during the first half of the 20th century is Frederick Douglass Patterson. Orphaned shortly after his birth in 1901 and raised by his sister in Texas, Patterson received his DVM and MS degrees at Iowa State University and his PhD from Cornell.¹



Dr. Frederick Douglass Patterson, founder of the veterinary school.

(Photo available from Tuskegee University)

Patterson became the third president of Tuskegee Institute in 1935 at the time when the south was moving from cotton plantation agriculture to raising livestock. The need for veterinarians became more acute as farmers were poorly equipped to raise cattle and other livestock. The

southern veterinary colleges, where most of the aspiring Black students lived, could not fill this need because they were segregated. Meanwhile, as the northern colleges became more pressed to admit students from their own states, they were less able to provide more than a handful of places for African-American students.

Into this void came Dr. Patterson. Overcoming enormous challenges, and using modest public support from the state of Alabama as well as student labor, he opened a veterinary college in 1945 with the expectation that it would become a regional center for Black students. Veterinarians who had received their DVM degrees from Kansas State University were among the early faculty, including Dr. T.S. Williams who served as dean for almost 40 years. Other faculty traveled to northern schools like Cornell and Iowa State University for graduate degrees during the 1950s and 1960s. This was essential to establish credible teaching and research programs and to eventually achieve accreditation by the American Veterinary Medical Association.



Moton Field, Tuskegee, Alabama

Patterson also supported the development of the Tuskegee Airman program while president.

(Photo by Dr. Donald Smith)

Concern for public health has always been a feature of Tuskegee's veterinary program, and many of their graduates have had careers in food safety and research. The college is now even closely aligned with human health because of its unique organizational structure that combines Veterinary Medicine with Nursing and Allied Health in the same college. Veterinarian Tsegaye Habtemariam, who jointly administers all of these programs, feels that the unified governance

provides opportunities for advancing the 'one health' agenda through facilitation of a stronger role for veterinarians in promoting the health of people as well as animals.

Two current deans of veterinary medicine in the United States are graduates of Tuskegee: Willy Reed (Purdue University) and Phillip Nelson (Western University of the Health Sciences). Along with another alumnus, Michael Blackwell (former chief of staff for the U.S. surgeon general and veterinary dean emeritus at the University of Tennessee); and Tuskegee's current dean, Dr. Habtemariam, these distinguished educators serve as positive role models for young African-Americans who aspire to leadership positions in the health professions.



Tsegaye Habtemariam, DVM, PhD, MPVM
Dean of Veterinary Medicine, Nursing & Allied Health
(Photo available from Tuskegee University)

Visitors to Tuskegee's campus are deeply moved by symbols of the African-American educational tradition. An inspiring sculpture of founder Booker T. Washington sits beside the campus chapel, inscribed with the words, "He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry." A few miles from campus is the airfield used by the Tuskegee Airman and made famous by the 2012 movie "Red Tails" and the current off-Broadway play, "Black Angels over Tuskegee."

For current and future veterinarians of all backgrounds, one cannot consider Tuskegee University or her veterinary graduates without acknowledging the extraordinary legacy of Frederick Douglass Patterson, DVM, PhD, one of the most important veterinarians of the 20th century. Historians recognize Patterson's most noteworthy achievement as the founding, in

1944, of the cooperative fundraising organization which became known as the United Negro College Fund.²

¹ Adams, EW. The Legacy. A history of the Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine. The Media Center Press, Tuskegee University. 1995. P 11, 12.

² Anonymous. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 60 (summer 2008): 1.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.